

Homily: 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2020

I wonder – what makes you feel loved? Often we feel most loved when someone shows us kindness, gives us a gift or says something which expresses their love. And perhaps the same is true of our experience of God’s love for us. We tend to think that God loves us when things are going well in our lives. Yet St Paul today teaches us something very different. “Nothing can come between us and the love of God”, he says, “even if we are troubled or worried, or being persecuted, or lacking food or clothes...” Paul in fact knows this from his own experience – many times he has been persecuted, attacked, flogged, shipwrecked, imprisoned, hungry... but he has never been separated from the love of God. It always overcomes all these barriers, and it never leaves us, even if sometimes we struggle to feel the love of God in our lives. We need faith to know that God loves us even when life gets really tough.

We see a very concrete sign of St Paul’s teaching in the Gospel today. Jesus takes pity on a large crowd – many thousands of people – and he heals those who are sick. But time passes and the evening sets in, and the disciples know that the people are hungry. So they come to the Lord and say, “Send the people away so that they can get food”. It’s a sensible enough suggestion. But Jesus knows better: nothing can come between the people and the love of God. Not even if they are lacking food. They must stay with Him, because He is the sign, the living embodiment of God’s love. “Nothing can come between us and the love of God made visible to us in Christ Jesus,” Paul teaches, “Not even if we are lacking food.” The thousands who were fed by Jesus discovered this – not just because He fed them, but even more so because He would not send them away. Their need of physical food was real; their need of God’s presence and His love was greater.

We don’t have to read far between the lines of the Gospel today to recognise that this miracle points us to the Eucharist. Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it and handed it to the disciples to distribute among the crowd: it could hardly be a clearer sign of Holy Communion, in which the Lord takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and hands it to His disciples to be distributed to the people. The Eucharist is sometimes called the ‘sacrament of love’; it is here that the love of God is made visible, and here that we are called to share that love. At the Last Supper Jesus gave us the Eucharist, and at the same time gave us the commandment that accompanies it: “Love one another, as I have loved you”.

In the Eucharist, then, we are called to experience the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus. Here we see that God desires to be close to us, and even calls us into a new intimacy with Him. Here we see the self-giving love of God, as the broken Bread makes present the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for our salvation. Here we see a sign of the eternal banquet of heaven, which is the final proof of God’s love for us. God wants to spend all eternity with you – what greater sign of His love for you could there be? Everything about the Eucharist points us to the love of God, made visible, right here at the altar, in Christ Jesus our Lord.

“Love one another, just as I have loved you”, Jesus teaches in this sacrament. That same love made visible here is the love we are called to share with others. The Mass gives us

grace which we can use to show greater love for others. Experiencing the charity of God, we can't keep it to ourselves. It's striking that when the disciples want to send the people away because their hunger is becoming a problem, Jesus tells them: "Give them something to eat yourselves". We live in a hungry world: hunger for physical food, hunger for spiritual food, hunger for meaning and purpose, hunger for love. We have received from the Lord, and we must seek to give.

This miracle comes in the Gospel soon after a number of parables of growth from small beginnings – the mustard seed, the yeast that leavens the flour, the sower and the seed, the wheat amongst the darnel. Here again we see the small beginnings of God's work – just five loaves and two fish, which in His hands were enough to feed a multitude. Perhaps we can take some comfort and hope here: our smallest acts of love, offered to Jesus, have the potential to be something so much greater; we can become signs, helping to make God's love visible in our world again.

Fr Andrew

